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The genesis of terrorism in the Sahara: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Yvan Guichaoua reports back on the rise of a new force in the Sahara, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, news of which has reached the Western press through its kidnapping of European aid workers.

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In January 2011, a terrorist group self-branded Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) kidnapped a young French NGO worker and his visiting friend in one of the poshest restaurants of Niamey, Niger's state capital. En route to a probable hideout in Mali's mountainous north, the kidnappers and their hostages were stopped by the military intervention of French troops during which the two Frenchmen were killed. This episode is so far the most spectacular action carried out by AQIM which stunningly demonstrated its capacity to hit any target in the vast Saharan zone it has been roaming for years.

The group is now considered a major terrorist threat in the area. Presently, it still holds five European hostages (four French workers of the multinational company AREVA kidnapped in the northern Niger mining town Arlit and an Italian tourist abducted near Djanet in Algeria) and appears to be in no hurry to release them. Many more Europeans have been detained by AQIM since January 2007, the group's official birth date. One of them was executed, another one died in obscure circumstances but most of them have been released in exchange for the payment of generous ransoms.

Crucially though, most of AQIM's victims are nationals of the countries where the armed outfit operates: Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania.

AQIM's operational capacity in the Sahara today is the outcome of a gradual encroachment in a territory to which it did not originally belong. AQIM is the outgrowth of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), created by Islamist radicals during the Algerian civil war and repelled southward by Algerian security forces. Historically, it had little social support base it could rely on in the desert. It had little following, too (a few hundred men at most). The core of its combatants is composed of Jihadist fighters trained in Afghanistan and sharing a strong warlike ethos.

How can a violent group sustain itself in a region it is largely alien to? The difficult to control Saharan terrain might be a factor but does not constitute the sole explanation: AQIM didn't fill in a political void. I would argue that the GSPC, which became AQIM in 2007, managed to gain a foothold in Algeria's bordering Saharan countries through a combination of smart business strategies, astute efforts to foster a modus vivendi with local populations and, indirectly, permissive circumstances engendered by central governments policies in the region. Importantly, too, taking the name Al Qaeda in the first place was a far from benign move: it almost magically upgraded the disparate gathering of Jihadists to the status of unitary transnational threat, exciting the acronym fetishism prevalent among western policy-makers and media.

The economic and consequently logistical consolidation of AQIM was permitted by the bonanza of ransoms paid by the hostages' home countries but also a deep involvement of the Salafist group in cross-border trafficking. All sorts of commodities travel the desert illegally: food, electrical appliances, and cigarettes but also stolen cars, drugs and arms. Another bountiful trans-Saharan business also consists in transporting human "loads" - as local drivers put it - of African migrants back and forth. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of AQIM's most prominent figures, is said to control significant shares of this pervasive trafficking and to extort taxes from other smugglers. Anecdotally, when I asked young inhabitants of Tamanrasset what they knew about AQIM in 2009, the first answers that came up pointed to their reputation

as big traffickers and the mechanical excellence of their cars. It is worth noting that AQIM, while probably a big player, does not fully control cross-border smuggling which flourishes throughout West Africa and has rapidly become institutionalised, reaching state circles. In the same way, ransom extortion does not just benefit AQIM but also intermediaries and negotiation-brokers connected to states.

Along with carving out a sizeable space in the local political economy, AQIM chiefs built alliances with some local Tuareg leaders, involving sufficient collaboration to let AQIM's activities prosper. Such alliances are by no means the rule and might only be temporary. They owe little to religious or ideological connections (although AQIM figures might have a fanbase among the region's disenfranchised youth) and, more likely, a lot to the micro-politics of parochial and economic rivalries in the area.

Some background circumstances have also helped them: for decades now, sections of the economically and politically marginalized Tuareg society have been taking up arms against their central governments in Niamey and Bamako without achieving much in developmental or political terms. Protracted low intensity insurgency in Mali and Niger's respective northern provinces was not only accompanied by reluctance among some Tuaregs to cooperate with their national authorities but it has also facilitated the proliferation of banditry in the region, providing AQIM with enthusiastic potential subcontractors. Many of the latest kidnappings claimed by AQIM were actually not perpetrated by AQIM members but by local criminals selling back their catches to the Salafist outfit.

Confronted by AQIM's growing influence in the Sahara, the national authorities of the region and their military backers, France and the United States, have provided discordant responses. The US seem to collaborate actively with Algeria, which has been infuriated by European governments' proneness to cede to AQIM's demands in exchange of the liberation of their hostages. Similarly, Algerian authorities point accusing fingers at the alleged incompetence of the Malian military. Meanwhile, France has developed privileged security cooperation arrangements with Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, which is not welcomed by Algeria, and whose results remain to be seen. One does not need to endorse conspiracy theories to realise that

the countries supposedly involved in the counter-terrorist effort have differing agendas and views over the strategies to follow and their timing.

The spectacular rise of a secular revolutionary movement in Arab countries in the past weeks is certainly not good news for Al Qaeda on a global level. As far as AQIM is concerned though, there is much more to consider than just the weakening of an ideology. The criminalisation of the Sahel's political economy might cause more enduring damage than the Jihad.

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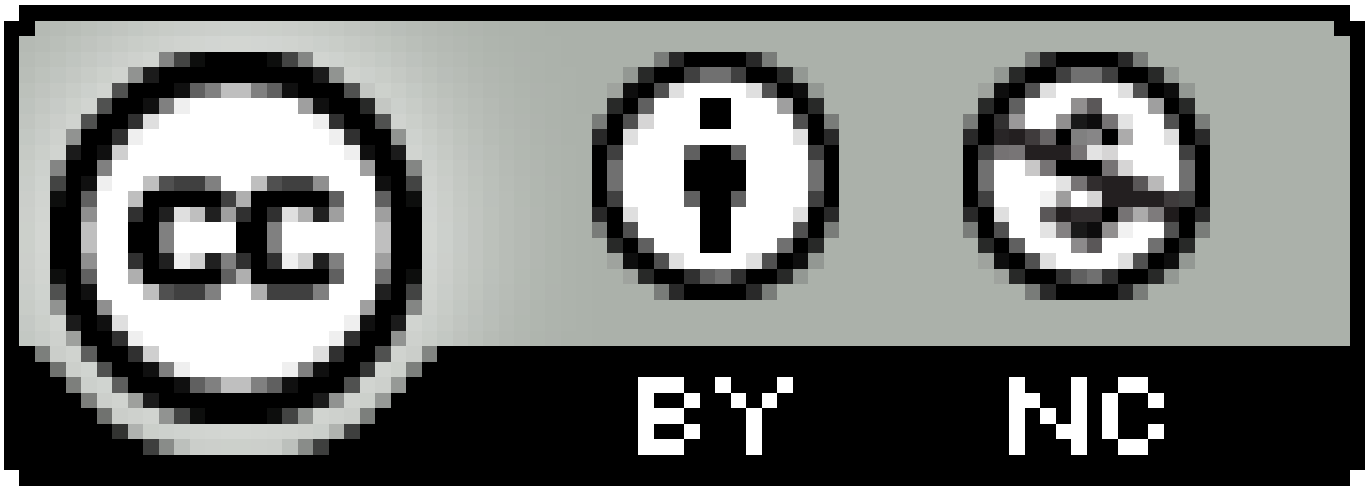

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